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Rebuilding the network: New relationships in widowhood

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Abstract

This study examined the formation of nonkin relationships in widowhood, using personal network data from 548 older men and women who lost a partner through death fewer than 10 years earlier. Relationships established after the death of the spouse were cited by 27.6% of the respondents. New relationships with neighbors were cited in particular. New relationships were more often nominated by women than by men. Formation of new relationships was strongly and positively associated with the duration of widowhood, the presence of a new partner, and having put effort into seeking new relationships. The findings suggest that, to gain a proper understanding of why some widowed individuals form new relationships and others do not, knowledge is required about the quality of the social network prior to widowhood.

Widowhood is a common experience in old age. Nevertheless, the death of the spouse is a highly disruptive event in the lives of older adults. For most people, losing the partner means losing the most intimate relationship they had. Daily living is changed in almost every aspect following the loss of the spouse. For these reasons, adjustment to widowhood is a very complex task.

According to the literature, adequate social support helps in the process of coping

with the death of the spouse. It generally enhances the psychological well-being of grieving widows and widowers (Bankoff, 1981, 1983; Morgan, 1989; Raphael, 1984; Stevens, 1989; Vachon, Rogers & Lyall, 1982; Vachon et al., 1982; Vachon & Stylianos, 1988). The transition to widowhood itself, however, is associated with major changes in the system of social support (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993; Morgan, Neal, & Carder, 1994; Schulz & Tompkins, 1990). Functions formerly served by the partner remain unfulfilled, at least temporarily, and the loss of the partner often leads to the loss of other relationships. Relationships with in-laws and couple-companionate friendships, in particular, have a high risk of dissolution following widowhood (Ferraro, 1989; Lopata, 1975; Stevens, 1989). Relationship losses also have an added negative impact: The death of a spouse usually creates an increase in the need for support and companionship.

With needs for social support increased and resources decreased, widowhood necessitates a reorganization of social life. Mainly, such a reorganization can be car-

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ried out both by intensifying existing relationships and by forming new ones. The latter receives relatively little attention in studies on adjustment to widowhood in old age. Little is known about how often new ties are formed and about the conditions influencing their development. These considerations brought us to focus on "new" relationships in widowhood—that is to say, relationships with neighbors, friends, and acquaintances established after the death of the spouse.

Friendship formation is not uncommon in old age (Blieszner 1989; Blieszner & Adams, 1992). In a study on friendship patterns of the oldest old, Johnson and Troll (1994) found that over one-half of their (predominantly female) respondents had formed friendships after age 65, while 45% had also made new friends after age 85. In her sample of 60–75-year-old widows who had been alone for between 3 and 5 years, Stevens (1989) found that 25% had acquired new female friends, and 40% became better acquainted with their neighbors. Jerrome (1981) sees making new friends in old age as a strategy for replacing the ties that are lost by giving up a job or losing a spouse. In her view, the role of friend substitutes for the roles of spouse or worker. Following Jerrome, we assume that the formation of new relationships in widowhood serves to compensate for the loss of the partner and concomitant losses. Also, the derivation of support from new relationships may prevent exhaustion in existing relationships. Of course, there is little chance of a full compensation for the marital relationship, unless new partnership is realized, because not all the needs generally served by a partner can be satisfied by friends (Weiss, 1974). Though older adults living without a partner tend to be more lonely than those with a partner, this is not so when they receive relatively high levels of friendship support, suggesting that friendships provide at least partial compensation for the partner relationship (Dykstra, 1995).

Not all widows and widowers are likely to develop new personal relationships.

Some may simply not feel the need to form them. Others may have a great wish to form new ties but not be able to do so. They may, for instance, be constrained by poor health or lack the opportunities for meeting potential friends.

In the present study, we examined data on the personal networks of 55–89-year-old widows and widowers who lost their spouse fewer than 10 years earlier. Our first aim was to determine how many respondents form new ties with neighbors, friends, and acquaintances. Second, we wanted to explain differences in relationship formation, assuming that new relationships are most likely to be formed by those who have the capacity and desire to do so. The questions we addressed were: (1) How many widows and widowers form new relationships with neighbors, friends, and acquaintances? (2) To what degree can differences in relationship formation be explained by differences in (a) opportunities for meeting people, and (b) dispositions favoring new social engagements?

Explanatory Framework

Central to our understanding of the reorganization of the personal network following widowhood is the concept of the *convoy*, as it has been formulated by Kahn and Antonucci (1980). According to Kahn and Antonucci, the structure of a person's *convoy*—those who are important to that person in terms of social support—is determined jointly by enduring properties of the person, such as sex and birth-cohort, by his or her requirements for social support, and by situational factors. Throughout the life-course, role-transitions and life-events such as moving and the death of convoy members affect the need for support and the likelihood of gaining and losing relationships, leading to continuous changes in the size and composition of the *convoy*. In addition, the past affects the future; thus, experiences, decisions, events, and the structure of the *convoy* earlier in life influence the development of the *convoy* over time. In view of this, a person's needs, circum-

stances, and life's history should be taken into account when explaining the formation of friendships in widowhood.

Next, the specific nature of friendships must be considered. Unlike family ties, friendships are voluntaristic relationships based on mutual choice. Their initiation, cultivation, and maintenance require active efforts. Thus, the motivation to expend effort is a prerequisite for friendship formation. Moreover, one needs opportunities to become acquainted with others. In themselves, neither opportunities nor motivation offers an explanation for the formation of new relationships. Notwithstanding favorable circumstances, a person may simply not be interested in extending his or her network; he or she may be satisfied with existing ties, or unwilling to put efforts into improving them. In contrast, a person may have a strong desire for new involvements yet lack access to potential new friends. For that reason, it is imperative to include both situational and dispositional factors in the explanation of relationship formation (Dykstra & de Jong Gierveld, 1994).

Opportunities

In the convoy model, situational factors shape the opportunities for relationship formation: the chances of meeting friendship candidates, the availability of similar others, and differential resource positions. The present study examined various factors associated with opportunities for friendship.

Gender. One way in which gender shapes opportunities for friendships in old age is through the availability of similar others. Research has shown that friendship relationships are more likely to develop between people of the same age, sex, marital, and socioeconomic status (Blau, 1973). Thus, the wide availability of similar others increases one's chances of making new friends. Cross-sex friendships are rare among older adults, probably due to normative constraints (Adams, 1985; Wright,

1989). Given the smaller numbers of older men, widows have greater chances of realizing new same-sex relationships. Older widows tend to have other widows as network members (Stevens, 1989, in press). This "society of widows" reflects both the wish to associate with similar others and the greater availability of older widows owing to women's higher life expectancy and their tendency to marry men who are senior in age. It follows that widowers are at a disadvantage, at least as far as their chances of finding similar others are concerned. More specifically, we expect widows, in comparison to widowers, to be more likely to have new relationships.¹

Age at widowhood. Age is negatively associated with the availability of resources such as health, mobility, and money that facilitate the successful formation of new friendships. Arling (1980) argues that to have a meaningful relationship, an older widow must have a certain degree of autonomy, which ultimately results in her ability to reciprocate. With advancing age there is also a decline in the number of roles people perform, and thus in the number and diversity of personal relationships (Van der Poel, 1993). The implication is that older adults have fewer opportunities for meeting potential friends and for being introduced to others. Sanders (1980/81) points to a different aspect of age, namely differences in time-perspective. The younger widowed (under the age of 63) in her study were characterized by "hope" and generally were attempting to make a new life for themselves. The older widowed were characterized by "hopelessness" and the realization that their lives were time-limited with little to look forward to. All considera-

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1. Our use of gender as an indicator of differential opportunities should not be seen as a denial of differences between men and women in relational dispositions. It is often suggested that women attach greater importance to relationships than do men. This consideration leads to a similar prediction, namely that widows are more likely to form new relationships than are widowers.

tions taken together, we expect a negative association between age at widowhood and the likelihood of forming new relationships. We expect those who were widowed at a younger age to be most likely to have new relationships.

Duration of widowhood. Empirical evidence suggests a curvilinear relationship between friendship interaction and the amount of time since widowhood. For example, panel data analyzed by Ferraro, Mutran, and Barresi (1984) indicated that those widowed between 1 and 4 years were more likely than those recently widowed or those widowed more than 4 years to increase involvement in friendship networks. Presumably, during the intermediate period, after the grief work is accomplished, the widowed are in the process of finding and testing new relationships, and later will settle on those most satisfying. We are not looking at when, but rather at whether, new relationships are established. The duration of widowhood directly reflects the amount of time (i.e., the opportunity) a person has had for establishing new relationships. We expect the long-term widowed to be most likely to have new relationships.

Organizational participation. It is safe to assume that people who are well integrated socially have better chances of forming friendships, for they have more access to potential friends. Participation in organizations outside the home, such as the workplace, the church, and voluntary organizations, provides opportunities for meeting others. People in these contexts are likely to have shared backgrounds and interests; these in turn encourage the development of friendships. In a study among elderly 85 years and older, Johnson and Troll (1994) found that the most common sources of new friendships were community associations such as churches or senior centers; meeting friends through previous work settings was less common. We therefore expect the widowed who participate in organiza-

tions to be more likely to have new relationships than those who do not.

New partner. Involvement in a new partner relationship directly and indirectly adds to the chances of forming new friendships. Introduction into the network of the partner enlarges one's pool of social contacts. In a society where interactions tend to be organized on a couple-companionate basis, the presence of a partner facilitates entry into and participation at social gatherings (cf. Lopata, 1979). For women in particular, an escort is often a precondition for going to public places. Therefore, our expectation is that widows and widowers with a new partner are more likely to have (other) new relationships in comparison to those who have remained single.

Dispositional factors

Relational dispositions, more so than situational factors, reflect past experiences, inclinations, and practices developed over the life-course. The motivation to expend efforts in seeking friends, indicating that friendships are considered important, tends to result from positive experiences in former and ongoing relationships with friends. Stevens (1989) demonstrated that the capacity to compensate for lost relationships is mediated by biographical circumstances, such as the willingness and the ability to invest in friendship during a widow's married life. Those who during the course of their lives have strongly depended on the ties at hand, such as the spouse and family members, tend to have greater difficulty finding new support sources than do those accustomed to having friendships outside the family. Our indicators of relational dispositions in widowhood reflect both current and past life-styles.

Effort. One indicator of relational dispositions is the willingness to put effort into the formation of friendships. We expect respondents who have actively been seeking new relationships after the death of the spouse

to be more likely to have new relationships than those who have not.

Education. According to Lopata (1973a, 1993) the amount of education is the most important resource in building new support systems. Education provides people with the ability to define their problems or desires, to locate outside resources, and to take action toward solutions. Education is essential in voluntaristic social engagements: It helps people adopt a life-style of planned social engagements, making them less dependent on spontaneous encounters. The level of education also generally indicates the availability of other personal resources that facilitate the utilization of opportunities for contact. We therefore expect the more educated widowed to be more likely to have new relationships than the less educated.

Independence. Marital couples differ in the extent to which leisure activities are shared. In some marriages, partners spend most of their free available time together; in others, partners go their own way. Accordingly, some have mostly joint friendships, whereas others primarily have contacts of their own. In Lopata's (1973b, 1979) work, the greatest disorganization at widowhood was found among women who were highly dependent on their spouses. Women who had followed traditional sex-role patterns, inhibiting them from developing and establishing an independent life-style, had the greatest difficulty adapting to being alone. When it comes to initiating relationships in widowhood, those who were in the habit of going about on their own are likely to have an advantage. We expect the widowed with (a) mainly social contacts of their own, or (b) leisure-time activities of their own during marriage, to be most likely to have new relationships.

Design of the Study

Data

The data are from the NESTOR survey on Living Arrangements and Social Networks (NESTOR-LSN). In 1992, face-to-face in-

terviews were conducted with 4,494 respondents. They constituted a stratified random sample of men and women born in the years 1903 to 1937. The sample was stratified in such a way that older respondents, older men in particular, were overrepresented. The sample was taken from the registers of 11 municipalities in the Netherlands: the city of Amsterdam and two rural communities in the west; one city and two rural communities in the south; and one city and four rural communities in the east. Both institutionalized and noninstitutionalized individuals were included in the sample. The response was 61.7%, which by Dutch standards, and for a sample of older adults, is quite acceptable. In the Netherlands, there is a strong sensitivity to privacy issues (e.g., invasion of privacy is the main reason why no census has been held since 1971), and response rates tend to be lower among older adults (Bethlehem & Kersten, 1986; Herzog & Rodgers, 1988).

Respondents

We selected all respondents who had experienced the death of a partner not more than 10 years earlier, leaving us with a sample of 337 widows and 211 widowers. For 30 respondents, it was the second experience of widowhood, and for one it was the third. Note that our definition of widowhood also applies to the loss of a partner of the same or of the opposite sex with whom living quarters are shared. Nevertheless, the large majority (over 95%) of cases involves the loss of a spouse.

At the time of the interview, 3 (0.9%) of the widows and 23 (10.9%) of the widowers were involved in a new partner relationship. Of these, 6 had remarried, 8 were living together without being married, and 12 were not sharing living quarters. Nevertheless, for the sake of simplicity, we refer to all respondents as being widowed. On average, those with a new partner were younger at the time of widowhood, $t_{(546)} = 2.1, p < .05$. The mean ages for the two groups were 69.1 ($SD = 10.0$) and 72.8 ($SD = 8.8$).

As a direct result of the NESTOR-LSN sampling procedure, whereby the oldest and older males in particular were oversampled, the number of widowers in our sample was higher than expected on the basis of Dutch population figures. The demographics showed that widowhood differed for the men and women in our sample. First, the widows were generally younger. The current mean age of widows was 75.3 ($SD = 8.8$) against 79.9 ($SD = 7.6$) for widowers, $t_{(547)} = 6.6$, $p < .001$. Second, widows tended to lose their spouses at a younger age. The mean age at widowhood was 70.6 ($SD = 8.8$) for the women, against 75.9 ($SD = 8.9$) for the men in our sample, $t_{(547)} = 7.1$, $p < .001$. Third, the duration of widowhood was longer among the women. On average, women lost their spouses 4.6 ($SD = 2.6$) years earlier, whereas the men lost their spouses 4.0 ($SD = 2.7$) years earlier, $t_{(547)} = 2.7$, $p < .01$. These findings were not only true for the NESTOR-LSN sample, but also of widowhood more generally (CBS, 1994).

Measures

Social network. The procedure by which network members were identified is an adaptation of the one developed by Cochran, Larner, Riley, Gunnarson, and Henderson (1990). The aim was to have information on those with whom the older adult interacted regularly, and on the diversity of those contacts. The survey focused on the interactive network. Seven relationship domains were specified: household members; children and their partners; other kin; neighbors; colleagues; organizational contacts; and "others." For each domain, the respondent was requested to specify the names of those with whom they were "in touch regularly" and who were "important" to them. The definitions of "regular contact" and "important" were left to the respondents. To be nominated, network members had to be at least 18 years old. A limit of 80 was set on the number of network members that could be nominated.

For all network members, information was gathered on relationship type (is the

person a sibling, friend, neighbor, etc.), gender, and frequency of contact. Additional questions were asked about the 12 (or fewer, if fewer relationships had been nominated) network members with whom contact was most frequent (the so-called top 12). One of these questions concerned the duration of the relationship.

New relationships were nonpartner, nonkin relationships formed after the spouse had died. Thus, relationships with newly acquired family members (e.g., children-in-law) were not considered. Given that information on the duration of relationships was only available for the members of the frequent contact network (the top 12), new relationships could only be identified in this part of the network.

Despite the common criterion "most frequent contact" there is much variability among the 12. For example, relationships from relatively small networks have high chances of being included in the top 12, even if contact is infrequent. To ensure comparability across networks, the analysis was restricted to relationships with a minimum contact frequency. Only those new network members with whom the respondents were in touch at least monthly were considered. This restriction did not affect the findings: No substantial differences in the number and diversity of new relationships were observed after imposing the criterion of at least monthly contact.

Comparisons across networks are also complicated by differences in kin availability. It is conceivable that nonkin relationships of respondents with many family members have fewer chances of being among the top 12, and thus cannot be identified as "new" or "not new." To check for this possibility, we computed correlations between the number of new nonkin relationships and the number of family members in the larger network and the top 12, respectively. None were significant, indicating the absence of a selectivity effect.

Age at widowhood. We used five categories for the age at widowhood: 45 to 54

years, 55 to 64 years, 65 to 74 years, 75 to 79 years, and 80 years and over.

Duration of widowhood. We used four categories to distinguish the duration of widowhood: less than 1 year; between 1 and 3 years; between 3 and 5 years; and between 5 and 10 years.

Organizational participation. Measures of organizational participation used included frequent church attendance (i.e., attending church services every two weeks or more often), active membership in at least one voluntary association, and employment after widowhood (but not necessarily employment at present).

Effort. Our first measure of relational dispositions was the willingness to put effort into developing relationships. During the interview we asked: "After the death of your spouse, did you undertake many efforts to obtain, maintain or intensify contact with your friends and acquaintances?" We expected respondents who provided an affirmative response to be more likely to have new relationships than those who did not do so.

Education. The second measure of relational dispositions was the achieved level of education. Our analyses contrasted those with at least general secondary education (the "more educated") with those who had not attained that level (the "less educated").

Independence in marriage. During the interview, two questions were asked to assess independence in marriage: (1) "When your spouse was still alive, were your social contacts primarily contacts of the two of you as a couple, or did you primarily have social contacts of your own?" (2) "With regard to leisure-time activities outside the home, did the two of you mostly go out together or did you mostly go out on your own?"

Procedure

First, we examined the likelihood of widows and widowers nominating new relationships as network members, and of nominating relationships of a particular type. Subsequent analyses focused on the explanation of relationship formation. The contribution of opportunities and dispositions was examined by performing bivariate and multivariate analyses.

Results

We first describe the likelihood of nominating relationships. Some 151 respondents, 27.6% of the group, began new relationships. As expected, a larger proportion of widows than of widowers reported new relationships: 31.8% vs. 20.9%, $\chi^2_{(1)} = 7.7, p < .01$. The proportions of respondents who nominated at least one new relationship of a particular type are reported in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, respondents were most likely to form new relationships with neighbors. More than twice as many respondents cited new neighbors as opposed to new friends and acquaintances.

Next, we show whether differences in the likelihood of nominating new relationships are attributable to differences in either (a) the *opportunities* for forming new relationships as indicated by gender, the age at widowhood, the duration of widowhood, organizational participation, and the presence of a new partner, or (b) relational *dispositions* as indicated by the effort put in seeking relationships and educational attainment, and independence in marriage. Results of bivariate analyses are presented in Table 2.

Opportunities

As described earlier, the likelihood of forming new relationships was greater among widows than among widowers. The finding that those who were widowed at a relatively young age were most likely to form new relationships was also consistent with our expectations. The proportions

Table 1. Percentages of widows and widowers with at least one new relationship of a particular type

	Entire group			Only those with new ties
	Males (<i>n</i> = 211)	Females (<i>n</i> = 337)	All (<i>n</i> = 548)	(<i>n</i> = 151)
Neighbors	13.3%	20.8%	17.9%	64.9%
Friends and acquaintances	5.2	9.5	7.8	28.5
Contacts through church and organizations	3.3	8.0	6.2	22.5
Contacts through work and school	1.9	2.7	2.4	8.6
Other contacts	0.9	0.3	0.5	2.0

were 40.9% for the 45–54-year-olds (*n* = 22), 38.6% for the 55–64-year-olds (*n* = 88), 26.0% for the 65–74-year-olds (*n* = 181), 26.5% for the 75–79-year-olds (*n* = 131), and 19.8% for those 80 years and over (*n* = 126). As expected, the duration of widowhood was positively associated with the likelihood of forming new relationships. The proportions citing new relationships were 3.1%, 12.3%, 26.1%, and 44.0% for those who lost their partner less than 1 year (*n* = 65), between 1 and 3

years (*n* = 138), between 3 and 5 years (*n* = 111), and between 5 and 10 years (*n* = 234) ago, respectively. Significant differences according to organizational participation were also found. However, for church attendance the differences were not in the expected direction: Those who attended church services at least every 2 weeks (*n* = 222) were less, rather than more, likely to nominate new relationships (22.5% vs. 31.0%) than those who did not attend church that often (*n* = 326). The

Table 2. Likelihood of forming new relationships in widowhood as a function of opportunities and dispositions (*n* = 548)

	<i>tau-b</i>	<i>df</i>
<i>Opportunities</i>		
Gender	.12**	1
Age at widowhood	-.12*	4
Duration of widowhood	.34**	3
Organizational participation		
Church attendance	-.09*	1
Active membership	.08*	1
Employment after widowhood	.10*	1
New partner	.11**	1
<i>Dispositions</i>		
Effort	.19***	1
Education	.09*	1
Independence		
Own friends in marriage	.02	1
Own activities in marriage	-.07	1

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

findings for the other two indicators of organizational participation were in the expected direction: 31.2% for those who were active members of at least one voluntary association ($n = 269$) vs. 24.0% for those who were not ($n = 279$), and 44.4% for those who had been employed ($n = 36$) after they became widows vs. 26.4% for those who had not ($n = 512$). As expected, the results showed evidence of the socially integrating function of a new partner: 50.0% of those with a new partner ($n = 26$) had nominated new relationships vs. 24.0% for those without such an involvement ($n = 522$).

Dispositions

Are the widowed who report undertaking specific efforts in developing and intensifying ties with friends more likely to form new relationships? The answer is yes: 43.6% of the widowed who reported such efforts ($n = 117$) vs. 23.0% for those who did not ($n = 431$) nominated new relationships in their networks. The findings for educational attainment were also in the expected direc-

tion: 39.3% of the more educated ($n = 56$) and 26.2% of the less educated ($n = 492$) reported new relationships. Contrary to our expectations, no significant differences were found for independence in marriage. Of those who primarily had social contacts of their own ($n = 112$), 29.5% reported new relationships; the figure was 27.1% for those with mostly couple-companionate social contacts ($n = 436$). Of those who primarily had their own leisure-time activities outside the home ($n = 133$), 21.8% reported new relationships; the figure was 29.4% for those with mostly couple-companionate leisure-time activities ($n = 436$).

Logistic regression analyses were performed to assess the relative contributions of opportunities and dispositions to the explanation of differences in the likelihood of forming new relationships. Two models were noted. The first considered opportunities only; the second added dispositions. The improvement in predictive ability was tested. Results from the first model (see Table 3 for details) show that when all the measures of opportunities were considered together, only differences according to gen-

Table 3. Logistic regressions predicting the likelihood of forming new relationships as a function of opportunities and dispositions

	Model 1	Model 2
	Exp(B)	Exp (B)
<i>Opportunities</i>		
Gender	1.96**	2.00**
Age at widowhood	1.07	1.14
Duration of widowhood	2.40***	2.50***
Organizational participation		
Church attendance	.63*	.62*
Active membership	1.46	1.39
Employment after widowhood	1.82	1.80
New partner	2.99*	2.88*
<i>Dispositions</i>		
Effort		2.90***
Education		.98
Independence		
Own friends in marriage		1.38
Own activities in marriage		.65

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

der, the duration of widowhood, church attendance, and the presence of a new partner accounted for differences among the widowed in the likelihood of forming new relationships. With the exception of church attendance, the differences were in the expected direction: In comparison with respective counterparts, women, the long-term widowed, infrequent church attenders, and the newly partnered were more likely to have new relationships.

The second model tested whether dispositions accounted for differences in relationship formation over and above opportunities. This was found to be so. More particularly, consideration of the effort exerted in seeking new relationships led to a significant increase in explanatory power. Results indicate that efforts were rewarded. Given available opportunities, the widowed who made an effort to improve or expand their networks were more likely to have new relationships than were those who did not report doing so.

Discussion

The loss of the partner and the concomitant loss of the relationships that were part of the life-style of a married couple necessitate a reorganization of personal relationships by widows and widowers. In this article we examined the formation of new relationships in widowhood, assuming that the engagement in new relationships serves as compensation for experienced losses. Focusing on the voluntaristic nature of friendships, we posited that the opportunities for interacting with others and the dispositions favoring new social engagements are important determinants of friendship formation.

Formation of new relationships certainly was not typical in our group of widows and widowers: A minority of 27% reported new network members. Nevertheless, this is not an insignificant number. In assessing our findings, one must take into account the rather stringent criteria we used to identify "new" relationships. They had to be among

the top 12 "important" ties characterized by "regular contact" and, more specifically, "at least monthly contact." Such a procedure most probably provides a conservative estimate of the number of widowed who develop new relationships after the loss of the spouse.

For example, it excludes recent acquaintances who, in the eyes of the respondent, do not (yet) meet the qualification "important." It is quite likely that a higher figure would have been obtained had we asked a more direct question such as "After your spouse died, did you make any new friends?" The drawback of such a procedure is the lack of comparability in responses. The term "new friends" forms a diverse category. An identification procedure such as the one we used, which specifies in advance the criteria that new relationships must meet, provides a more meaningful basis for drawing comparisons across respondents.

A remarkably high proportion of the respondents cited new relationships with neighbors. To a certain extent, this finding may be a methodological artifact. Our study focused on the top 12 most frequent contacts. Frequency of contact is of course strongly determined by geographic proximity. Therefore it is not surprising to find an overrepresentation of people living nearby among the top 12 network members.

By definition, "new" neighbors were acquaintances developed after widowhood, and not existing ties that were intensified in more recent years. Presumably, new neighbors were people new to the neighborhood or residents of the new neighborhood to which the respondent may have moved. It is not uncommon for widows and widowers to move following the death of the spouse (Bradsher, Longino, Jackson, & Zimmerman, 1992). Nevertheless, the large number of new relationships with neighbors suggests that acquaintanceships were developed with people who were already neighbors, but with whom there was no contact prior to widowhood. It is not inconceivable, in fact, that some acquaintanceships were insti-

gated by the loss of the spouse. For neighbors who heard about the occurrence, it may have been the reason to initiate conversations during chance encounters on the street.

More generally, the findings underscore the importance of neighbors in late life. Old age is usually accompanied by a reduction in life space. With declining physical mobility, it becomes increasingly essential to have close ties in the immediate neighborhood (Adams, 1985/86; Litwak, 1989). Our results show the importance of the neighborhood as a recruiting ground for new social contacts in late life. Clearly, neighborhood contacts serve a special function for elderly widowed.

Opportunities for social interactions and relational dispositions have evolved from personal experiences, decisions, and events earlier in the life-course. The two measures of dispositions that reflect this life-course perspective most clearly were indicators of independence in marriage: own rather than couple-companionate friends and leisure-time activities. Earlier widowhood studies demonstrated the importance of an independent life-style in adjusting to life as a single person (Lopata, 1973b, 1979). However, the importance of independence in marriage for the formation of new relationships in widowhood was not empirically supported. It is possible that independence in marriage is a good predictor of general well-being in widowhood, but not necessarily of the likelihood of forming new relationships. Furthermore, the social networks of the widowed who reported having had their own friends during marriage may have suffered little disruption after the death of the spouse. For that reason, there may have been relatively little incentive to form new relationships.

The findings for church attendance were contrary to expectations. The widowed who attended church frequently were less rather than more likely to form new ties compared to those who did not go to church often. We had based our expectations on the view of the religious con-

gregation as a recruiting ground for new ties. We do not contest that view. Rather, the findings have led us to question the need for new relationships among active church members. We offer two alternative explanations. The first focuses on characteristics of the social network prior to widowhood. It is possible that those who attend church frequently have large, supportive networks. Presumably, compensation for the experienced loss can be found in existing relationships.² The second explanation focuses on the beneficial effects of religiosity. The personal relationship with God may be a source of solace and internal peace. Active church members may turn to God for support rather than seek new network members.

New questions emerging from our study all seem to revolve around needs for new relationships in widowhood. Some people appear to have few such needs. They cope on their own, either because of who they are or because they derive sustenance from religious sources. Others find compensation in existing relationships. Conversely, some people appear to have strong needs for new relationships. They have suffered disappointments or feel they cannot share their experiences with the people they know. Clearly, to understand relationship formation in widowhood, knowledge about the existing social network is required. Not only is knowledge required about the ways in which network members respond to the needs of the widowed, but also about the expectations the widowed have from others. We hope to address these questions in the future. The study reported here is part of a larger, ongoing project in which several waves of data will be collected.

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2. In the absence of longitudinal data, we test this *ad hoc* hypothesis by comparing the network size of the widowed who attended church once a week or more often with those who did not. The former had significantly larger networks than the latter ($t_{(544)} = 2.0, p < .05$). The means were 12.7 ($n = 222, SD = 8.2$), and 11.2, respectively ($n = 326, SD = 8.3$).

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